

Our Mutual Friend

Our Mutual Friend was the last novel which Charles Dickens would ever complete, and his first 'long' novel (that is, one issued in twenty monthly numbers or instalments) since *Little Dorrit* some seven years before. He actually started writing it in the November of 1863, although for two years before he had been meditating upon a new story and casting around for themes and images through which he might embody it; now that he had begun, at last, he was very eager to maintain his momentum in case he lost that initial rush of inspiration which propelled him forward. Yet to go back to the old and more elaborate way of working, after completing his last two novels in short weekly instalments for his periodical, left him 'quite dazed'. He was on unfamiliar ground in another sense, also, for it was in this novel that he dropped Hablot Browne as his illustrator and instead employed a young artist, Marcus Stone, whose work was much more 'modern' and naturalistic than anything 'Phiz' had been able to achieve. *Our Mutual Friend* was, in other words, a new start.

He was planning his narrative very carefully as a result and in his working notes he continually admonished himself to '... lay the ground carefully ... clear the ground, behind and before ... Lead on carefully ...' In addition he wanted to keep five instalments ahead of publication, and it is clear enough that he was making such elaborate preparations partly as a 'safety net' in case his old exuberant imagination and inventiveness should begin to fail him. Indeed later on, in the course of writing, he complained to a friend that he was 'want-

ing in invention', although there is little sign of that condition in the narrative itself.

'Lay the ground ...' he had said, and in one sense he was back on his old ground. London. The Great Oven. The place of dust and ashes. Of the outcasts, like Rogue Riderhood, and the poor, like Jenny Wren. *Our Mutual Friend* opens beside the Thames, a dark river here carrying the dead: a river which in an earlier essay he had described as '... such an image of death in the midst of the great city's life ...' And in another essay, 'Wapping Workhouse', he had meditated upon the posters which announced the discovery of the drowned; these images would enter the novel also. In fact his journalistic work was often like a form of shorthand, preparing the way for the larger patterns and designs which he would establish in his fiction. Another essay helped him in that process - it had been published in his periodical some fourteen years before, entitled 'Dust: Or Ugliness Redeemed' and in the course of an account of dust-heaps the author, R. H. Horne, touched upon many of the subjects which would animate Dickens's novel - a one-legged man, a drowned man restored to life, an intimation of redemption in the very cinders of the dust-heaps themselves. Dickens had read this essay all those years before, and yet somehow its essential shape and theme had lodged somewhere within his capacious imagination, until it emerged at that time in his own life when he was preoccupied with the meaning of death and identity, with the possibilities of rebirth or resurrection, and with the strange emblems of eternity which can be found in the dank and muddy streets of London. A word about the dust-heaps themselves: they were not quite the tidy piles of waste which the name implies, but rather large mounds of household waste and ordure which sent up an intolerable stench in the heat but over which many indigent people picked their way in their search for anything of even the slightest value.

By January 1864 he had written the first two instalments and then, in the following month, he took a house in London

where he continued with his work upon the novel. He had come back to the primary site of his imagination, and in fact it was on his return to the city that one of the strangest creatures in the narrative first occurred to him. He had been looking for a character with an odd occupation – ‘it must be something very striking and unusual’, he had told his illustrator, Marcus Stone, and then a few days later Stone took him to the shop of a taxidermist near Seven Dials. In a book which is in part about lost identity, and the nature of being reborn, the dissector of skeletons and the purveyor of stuffed animals was clearly a suitable candidate for inclusion within the narrative. And so Mr Venus was born. Other sources for Dickens’s characters were even closer to hand and there is no doubt, for example, that in the figure of the obstreperous and lordly Podsnap, Dickens was attempting at least a partial portrait of his friend, John Forster. Forster had become increasingly attached to society at precisely the time when Dickens himself was becoming more and more alienated from it, and in a sense he was pouring all of his rage and contempt into the figure of this preemptory and self-righteous English gentleman. *Our Mutual Friend* is the novel in which Dickens gives full force and meaning to his estrangement from the world around him.

But who were the Veneerings? In a sense the Veneerings were everywhere – in this novel Dickens really confronts for the first time the kind of society which was being established in the latter half of the nineteenth century, a society of plutocrats and financiers, of stock-jobbing and brokering, a society of false values and false lives. That is why, in *Our Mutual Friend*, he launches a bitter assault upon all aspects of English social life and seems indeed to be returning to the radicalism of his youth. He had come full circle, with Betty Hidgen fleeing from the workhouse just as Oliver Twist had once done. In addition Dickens attacks all the rumours and gossip of the metropolis, all those who prattle about other people’s lives because their own are so empty of meaning. It is hard not to feel

the presence of private disaffection here, also, since there is no doubt that there was at this time much speculation and innuendo about his relationship with Ellen Ternan. And although it would be invidious to place her within the novel itself, as some commentators have done, it is perhaps worth mentioning here that in *Our Mutual Friend* Dickens gives serious consideration to the theme of unrequited love; in this novel courtship is somehow aligned with death or the prospect of death, and love itself is sometimes foreshadowed by torturing anxiety and even madness. On a more superficial level, too, Dickens is inveighing in *Our Mutual Friend* against all the dinners and the parties, the receptions and the arranged marriages, at precisely the time he was in London, tired and sick to death of what he called ‘. . . public speechifying, private eating and drinking, and perpetual simmering in hot rooms . . .’

He returned for the summer to his country house in Kent, Gad’s Hill Place, but it seems that there was little peace for him even here. It was now that he complained about his lack of ‘invention’, for example, and in this period he was afflicted by various ailments which presage his fatal stroke some six years later. When in the following winter he was sorely tried by a swollen foot his friend Forster could justly claim in his biography that there was now ‘a broad mark between his past life and what remained to him of the future’. Dickens used to say that entering middle age was like walking through a graveyard, and it was in this period that his great friend, John Leech, died; Dickens was so distressed that he could hardly carry on with his work. These events and illnesses would perhaps be of little consequence at this late date, were it not for the fact that they created the very atmosphere in which *Our Mutual Friend* was written – a novel in which the dead rise up in the waters, where violence and murder take place, and where the strange crippled girl, Jenny Wren, calls out ‘Come up and be dead! Come up and be dead!’

Then death obtruded even more visibly than before.

Throughout the autumn and winter of 1864 he had been travelling regularly between England and France – in particular to the small village of Condette, near Boulogne, where it seems that Ellen Ternan was living with her mother. The nature of these journeys might have remained obscure if it had not been for one event which changed the whole course of Dickens's life; in June 1865, he was travelling back on the tidal train from Folkestone to London, with Ellen Ternan and Mrs Ternan, when most of the carriages crashed down from a bridge onto a river-bank below. Fortunately Dickens and his party were in a carriage which stayed intact, but Dickens at once jumped out and gave what help he could to the dying and the dead who were stretched on the ground beside the wreckage of the train. It was an experience he never forgot, and for the rest of his life he was prone to nervous terror whenever he travelled on trains; indeed he died on the fifth anniversary of the crash itself. One other detail may properly concern us here: he was carrying the manuscript for one of the instalments of *Our Mutual Friend* in the pocket of his overcoat, but the coat was still in the swaying carriage he had lately vacated with the Ternans. With his usual cool self-possession at moments of crisis, he clambered back into the carriage and retrieved the precious chapters.

He was so shaken by the experience, however, that when he tried to finish the instalment he realised that, for the first time in his writing career since *The Pickwick Papers*, he had written too little to fill the monthly number. But he nerved himself to continue, and through the rest of the summer worked on the novel at Gad's Hill Place; he finished in September and added a Postscript rather than the usual Preface to his labours in which he mentioned the crash at Staplehurst: 'I remember with devout thankfulness that I can never be much nearer parting company with my readers for ever, than I was then, until there shall be written against my life, the two words with which I have this day closed this book: THE END'. It was the first time in his writing life that he had writ-

ten a Postscript, and is it possible that he had some intuition that this would be the last time he would ever be able to write THE END to one of his works?

He had also in the Postscript made some remarks about the difficulties of writing the novel in monthly episodes, particularly with respect to the unfolding of the necessary pattern in the narrative, but this did not mollify his more severe critics – among them the young Henry James who described *Our Mutual Friend* as '... the poorest of Mr Dickens's works'. Many people would now in fact regard it as the greatest of his works, and the sea-change in critical attitude may suggest that, in the case of this novel at least, Dickens was writing ahead of his time. Of course there are scenes and episodes which had an immediate impact, just as they do still, and nothing is more powerful in this novel than the invocation of the Thames in the opening chapters. "I can't get away from it, I think," said Lizzie, passing her hand across her forehead. "It's no purpose of mine that I live by it still." And no one can get away from it: it is the bearer of death and of life, the great dark mystery which flows through the lives of the characters congregated in this book. But the novel also contains some of Dickens's funniest scenes. Sometimes the humour is of his familiar kind, particularly when it is directed against such 'Dickensian' figures as Mrs Wilfer who ate her dinner 'as if she were feeding somebody else on high public grounds', and the Dowager Lady Toppins who shakes and rattles like a partly animated skeleton from Mr Venus's shop. But there is also more poignant and fascinating comedy here, which particularly emerges in the conversations between Silas Wegg and Mr Venus: "... when you were," Mr Venus tells him, "as I may say, floating your powerful mind in tea." It is a wonderful phrase, and exemplifies one aspect of this novel – its extraordinary inventiveness and capaciousness, so that there are times when Dickens is able to bring together the comic and the sublime in such fresh combinations that they testify to his essentially innovative genius. Mr Venus and Silas Wegg are walking be-

neath the stars, for example, when the spectacle of those silent orbs seems to Silas Wegg to 'glisten with old remembrances!' In Dickens's earlier writing the stars would have revived memories of earlier and happier times but now, in the case of Mr Wegg, they inspire him only to coin a memorably vicious phrase about his mortal enemy, Mr Boffin, '. . . the minion of fortune and the worm of the hour!' And who can forget the malign splendour of the scene when the Lammles, realising belatedly that they have tricked each other, decide to play a confidence trick against the entire world?

Certainly there is no diminution of power and humour in this last novel; if anything Dickens has enlarged his range with a calm and unforced humour that can encompass both the smallest details and the greatest themes. It is a more serene and less bitter work than its immediate predecessor, *Great Expectations*, and manifests a very high level of creative self-assurance. London is no longer just a mud-stricken place of chance encounters, for example, but is so enlarged and broadened that it becomes an echo-chamber for all the desires and fears and memories which Dickens invokes in this book. It has an almost hallucinatory presence, at once both vivid and nebulous, and in that sense might stand as an emblem for the narrative itself. This is the strangest of Dickens's novels, but in many ways it is also the most poignant and the most beautiful. Just as Shakespeare created *The Tempest* at the close of his career, so did Dickens create *Our Mutual Friend*.